

Several states' websites did have videos imbedded into their sites with added captions and ASL. No states however, had any type of programs to educate on the use of internet or programs to offer free or reduced internet access. The South Carolina Council on Aging website had a link to a report that stated the fastest growing internet users are ages 70 to 75. The Pew Internet & American Life Project found that 78% of 50 to 59 year olds, 60% of 60 to 69 year olds, 45% of 70 to 75 year olds, and 27% of 76 plus use the internet on a regular basis. Fully 75% of internet users age 64 and older send and receive email, making email the most popular online activity for the age group. Instant messaging, social networking, and blogging have gained significant ground as important communication tools.³³ The internet is capable of putting all people with hearing loss on equal basis with everyone else.

In addition to the use of the internet for educational and social networking, there is also increasing use of this medium for mental health counseling for the Deaf. An abstract of an article presented in the *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, April 27, 2009, on the use of Telehealth states:

*Within the deaf population, an extreme mental health professional shortage exists that may be alleviated with videoconferencing technology—also known as telehealth. Moreover, much needed mental health education within the deaf population remains largely inaccessible. Researchers have warned that the deaf population may remain **underserved** if significant changes do not take place with traditional service delivery methods. This article evaluated the efficacy of telehealth in teaching psycho educational objectives, with special emphasis given to its application to the deaf population. Results indicate that telehealth can be regarded as an efficacious and cost-effective option in delivering health care to the deaf population. Participants also indicated satisfaction with the telehealth technology.*³⁴

Along the same line as telehealth for mental health counseling, recent articles on audiologic rehabilitation (AR) also identify the benefits of using the internet to enhance AR's potential. It is also being reported that cognitive compromises and psychoacoustic auditory processing disorders associated with aging may contribute to communication difficulties in this population. This makes the importance of AR for the older hearing aid user an important consideration.

Part of AR strategy involves using support groups. The explosion of electronic hearing loss support groups on the internet allows for an important alternative to traditional support groups when travel, distance, and schedules limit the availability of the face-to-face traditional group. Most laptop computers now include a small video camera for video chatting on the internet. Use of this option will also allow verbal communication within the on-line AR support group.

In the future, more older adults will be increasingly diverse in needs and aging in place. Programs and services will be adjusted to be consumer directed; internet use by older adults will continue to grow and will be an important communication tool for hearing loss populations.

North Carolina's population will become more diverse in the future. Very few states offer services specific to hearing loss issues in older adults. Only one, Texas, has a senior program. States that are similar or larger than North Carolina have more non-profit groups operating within the hearing loss community. Several states utilize non-profits to operate some of their mandated/required services to the Deaf and Hard of Hearing.

Recommendations for Consideration

The intent of this study is to provide answers to key questions that assist members of the Study Commission and the General Assembly in understanding the problems and barriers experienced by older North Carolinians with hearing loss and the resources available and needed. The study makes clear several important points: 1) hearing loss is widespread among older adults and, left unaddressed, could have profound and devastating impact on their health and functioning, 2) hearing loss is highly varied, complex and very little understood, even among professionals such as physicians, psychologists and social workers, and 3) effective communication is the key to an individual's ability to develop and